

Post 4/20/71

'Murder of Fred Hampton'

By Tom Shales

Even if it were not a good film, "The Murder of Fred Hampton" would be an important one. As it happens, the documentary, to be shown tonight at the American Film Institute Theater, is both.

What might be considered the American "Z"—started out as a documentary on the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party and its chairman, Fred Hampton.

But the film took on a new character in the early morning hours of Dec. 4, 1969. The Chicago police staged a raid on Panther headquarters on that day, and Fred Hampton died at the age of 21.

The film's viewpoint is clear from the title: That Hampton and the other Panther leader, Mark Clark, who died in the raid were the victims of willful extermination, not accident. The evidence it presents is concentrated in the second half of the film.

The evidence is imposing enough, in fact, to have probably influenced the Illinois Supreme Court. The film had two Chicago area engagements in late spring. In late August, the court ordered that indictments against Chicago State's Attorney Edward Hanrahan and 13 other law officers be made public. A Chicago judge had ordered them suppressed after they were handed down on June 25.

As the film begins, Chicago police are going through an elaborate re-enactment of the raid in a crudely simulated model of the Panther headquarters. Then, suddenly, Fred Hampton is alive and 20 and leading a rally audience of raised fists and "Right on's."

Panther rhetoric is among the most vivid oratory of our time, and this film resounds with it. Hampton himself was a striking speechmaker. "You can jail a revolutionary," he warns, "but you can't jail a revolu-

tion." Earlier he voices one of his many ultimatums to sleeping whiteys everywhere: "Stick 'em up, m-f--s; we come for what's ours."

Producer Mike Gray and his camera crew have captured the intensity and political poetry of the Panthers with all its urgent power. The graininess of the film and the occasional over-taxing of the sound

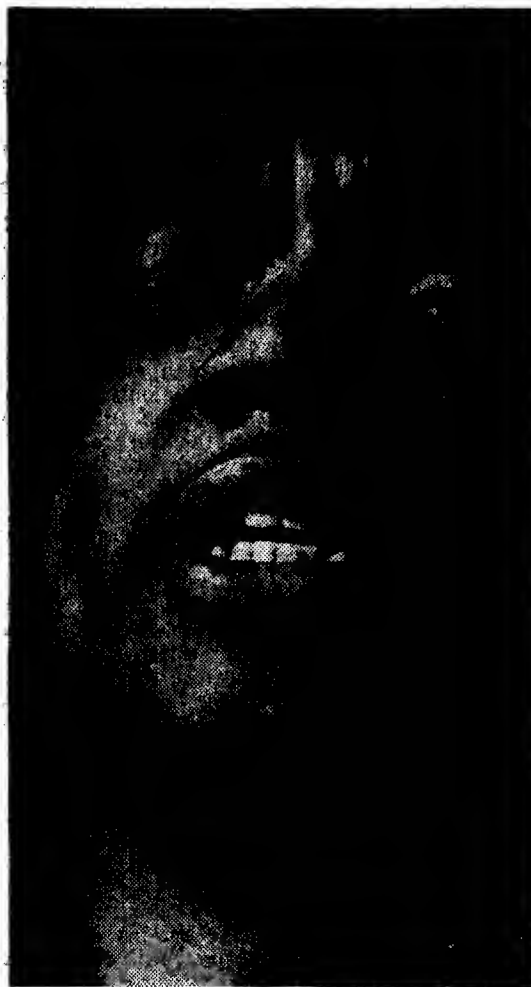
equipment only add to the immediacy. Howard Alk's editing, however, could be substantially improved, especially in the first half of the film, which suffers from repetition and occasional confusion.

Throughout the film, there are fascinating portraits of the approaching tragedy. Hampton himself publicly denounces Hanrahan as "a buffoon... whose speeches sound a lot like Hitler's."

Hanrahan's image is

See HAMPTON, B2, Col. 1

Film



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